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ABSTRACT

To gather data on attitudes related to the advisability of proposing a property tax increase to provide additional college support, Glendale Community College (GCC), in California, held four focus group meetings with classified employees. Following letters and electronic mail messages sent to all classified employees inviting them to participate, 29 full-time classified staff volunteered to participate in hour-long focus groups held at four times on July 1, 1996. All but one of the participants were residents of the District and would be affected by a tax increase. The focus groups discussed issues related to GCC's reputation, institutional needs, and advisability of seeking a property tax. An analysis of participants' comments revealed the following: (1) all four groups believed that having a community college in the community enhanced property values and contributed to the community by retraining the workforce and inexpensively educating students for transfer; (2) offering more classes, improving instructional technology, and performing seismic upgrades were identified as institutional needs; (3) participants raised concerns regarding trust and accountability, due to financial abuses of other local school districts; and (4) in general, there was a significantly negative reaction to the idea of a property tax increase. The focus group questions and suggested bond projects are appended. (TGI)

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ED 395 650

CLASSIFIED STAFF FOCUS GROUPS on a PROPERTY TAX INCREASE for the COLLEGE

by

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Glendale Community College

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Executive Summary

A set of focus groups was held among classified employees to consider a property tax increase to support college projects. The discussions in the focus groups reflected on a feeling that public institutions could not be trusted with more/new resources. Current stories about financial abuses by the LACCD and previous stories about LAUSD have reinforced general negative perceptions about public institutions. There was no willingness by the classified staff to increase property taxes to support college projects. On the other hand, however, three of the four focus groups did suggest the alternative of a sales tax increase as being fairer than a property tax increase.

In part, Glendale College's inability to deflect generalized criticism about public institutions was seen as related to a lack of public awareness about the college's many successes. All groups criticized the lack of good public relations and the lack of newspaper coverage about positive aspects of the college.

There was agreement as to a small set of priorities within the wish list -- instructional technology, seismic upgrades, and cleaning the air ducts. It should also be noted that the one community problem participants felt was caused by the college is parking -- restrictions on neighbors and insufficient space for students. As no parking item was on the wish list, the focus groups did not consider this possibility.

Background

The college has engaged a public relations firm to test the possibility of floating some sort of property tax measure to support college needs. There was concern noted by staff that the first draft of a proposed telephone survey of voters focused too heavily on construction projects. The suggestion was made that the college attempt to conduct focus groups among classified employees. The suggestion arose from two assumptions: 1) A majority of classified employees live in the district; and 2) Most classified employees are women, and women voters, especially those registered as *Republican*, are typically the swing voters on bond issues -- getting them is essential for passage.

Methodology

A letter from the Superintendent/President was distributed to classified employees inviting them to participate in focus groups about the issue of a property tax measure for college needs two weeks in advance of the focus group date. Managers also received a letter seeking their encouragement for the project. During the week before the Monday focus group times, email messages were broadcast to the staff seeking their participation. The email message also sought to dissuade the rumor that the purpose of the focus groups was to "convince" staff to support a tax increase.

Twenty-nine full-time classified staff volunteered to participate in hour-long focus groups at four times on Monday, July 1, 1996. Two registered individuals did not show-up, but two additional individuals came with co-workers. It appears that all but one of the 29 participants (26 women, 3 men) were residents of the district. One member of the Research & Planning Unit asked the question series while a second member of the unit took notes.

Questions were of three types (see Attachment A). **Reputation:** Questions 1, 2, and 3 sought to assess the college's contribution to (and reputation in) the community. **Institutional Needs:** Question 4 sought to determine if the employees felt there were any unmet "needs" at the college relative to the institution's functioning and mission. Questions 5, 6, 7, and 8 asked respondents to evaluate and rank projects identified by Administrative Services staff as unlikely to be funded from state resources (see Attachment B). **Advisability of seeking a Property Tax Increase:** Questions 9 and 10 sought to determine if the employees or their neighbors could be convinced to raise property taxes by $25 per year.

Findings

Reputation. Each group believed that having a community college is important for the community. The college's most important contributions were seen as retraining the work force and inexpensively educating students for transfer. The college was seen as adding a "prestigious tone" to the community, thus enhancing property values. It was also noted that it was positive to have adult education and community services classes for the "adults" in the area. One individual called the college "the best thing in Glendale."

In response to the question on problems caused by the college, all groups identified parking as a problem for students and the community. It's an inconvenience for immediate neighbors who live in the only section of town where one has to buy a permit to park in front of one's home. Additionally, general traffic congestion and lack of sufficient parking for students were noted. [Perhaps we should have included a parking structure on the list of possible projects.] In one group, there was a comment about the college "attracting" immigrants, but overall the group agreed that the immigrants came to live in Glendale and used the college for its proximity.

Institutional Needs. All four of the groups identified having more classes for students as a priority, but their strategies varied. One group felt strongly that the college was not doing enough to provide classes when convenient for students, specifically suggesting a wider program of weekend classes. Also related to student convenience was the idea of starting some evening classes at 5:00/5:30 p.m. (like PCC) instead of starting all of them at 6:30/7:00 p.m. Two groups felt that the college should develop more vocational/job preparation programs; specific suggestions included auto mechanics, dental hygiene, and (technical) medical areas.

It was further suggested that the college should offer more ESL classes, but in doing so should strive to find ways to deliver more intensive instruction -- to move students more rapidly to proficiency. Greater integration of PDC and contract education areas was suggested as a way to provide greater student access to computer training and job skills -- this might include using the PDC facilities for regular students. The final suggestion from the groups was that students need more lounge space on campus.

Each participant was given a list of projects that might be funded with a property tax increase (see Attachment B). There were no other specifics available to them other than their own awareness of the "master plan" building footprint that has been circulated on campus.

In reviewing the "wish list" of currently unfunded projects, all groups felt that Instructional Technology was essential for students to be up-to-date on hardware and software for jobs and life. Seismic Upgrades were also seen by all groups as important for the safety of students. On a somewhat more personal note, Cleaning Air Conditioning Ducts was uniformly seen as the most important deferred maintenance project and as a health issue for classified employees.

Construction of P.E. Facilities (for $13,700,000) was definitely seen as the lowest priority by all groups. Concerns seemed to come from two directions: 1) Why should adults be required to take physical education classes? And, 2) Why should the community pay for such "club" facilities? There was also concern expressed about supporting football. The Allied Health/Aviation Arts project (for $10,700,000) also generated a sharp negative critique, primarily because it was seen to benefit a small number of students as compared to other options in the vocational area. [As noted above, the participants saw a need to develop new vocational training programs.]

Other than as noted above, other specific projects elicited neither great support nor criticism. The thought that more effective use of staff could dent the deferred maintenance projects was mentioned.

Perhaps more important for management's strategic thinking was the participants' comments about "trust" and "accountability" generated by the discussion of infra-structure for Administrative Computing and the New Student Center/Campus Center Remodel project. As these projects had been discussed through the campus governance system and plans developed for them, participants wondered why were still on the wish list. Would a bond measure attempt to create funds that the college could use as it pleased rather than for what voters were told? This question was directly related to comparisons of the financial shenanigans of the Los Angeles Community College District (as reported over the prior month) and Los Angeles Unified District (as reported last year).

<u>Advisability of seeking a Property Tax Increase.</u> To say that there was no enthusiasm for a property tax increase at this time is actually an understatement. Perhaps reflecting all too well the empty-nest households that probably dominate district voting, one individual noted, "(I) put my kids and grandkids through GCC and paid for the college over some thirty years." Also, rather concrete, was a

pervasive feeling that the demographics of the community are just wrong for a tax increase for the college: Households are either on fixed incomes or the kids are too young for the parents to be thinking about college yet.

There was further concern that it was unfair for Glendale residents to have to pay for students from Los Angeles. This feeling was somewhat tied to the idea from three of the groups that using a sales tax increase to fund projects would be fairer than a property tax and hit more potential users of the college (non-district residents).

In all of the groups, news coverage of the LACCD's recent tax assessment actions and related diversion of funds as well as last year's revelations about LAUSD funding abuses (e.g., $97,000 for the superintendent's chauffer) were cited as issues of trust and accountability -- similar to many national polls suggesting the public has lost confidence in the honesty of government and public officials. This general concern was further reflected in statements like: "How do we know the money will be efficiently spent?" "People shouldn't be asked to pay for 'deceptive' projects." "I won't pay to let the staff surf the net."

Conclusions & Suggestions

It is clear that a good reputation alone would be insufficient to pass a property tax increase at this time. Clear and well communicated needs would have to be presented to convince voters. The focus groups uniformly suggested that the college needs more publicity about what it does and about its successes -- perhaps we need a newsletter like Glendale's *City Views* (the Alumni Newsletter?). If the college elected to pursue a tax increase, public forums should be held to explain to the public what the college plans and how the taxpayer will benefit. As one participant noted, if the college wants more money, "GCC has to prove that it is a *community* college."

Glendale Tax Increase Focus Groups

Thank you for joining us in today's focus group. We are here solely to solicit your opinions about the college, your neighbor's perceptions about the college, and the advisability of the college pursuing a tax increase in some form to meet certain future desires of the college.

The goal of a focus group is to get ideas and opinions "on the table" so that we can react to them, refine them, and determine how broad a consensus may exist about various issues. This is friendly...

We have a series of questions and issues I'll toss out...

1) How important is it to have a community college in Glendale?
2) What are the college's primary contributions to the community?
3) Does the college cause any problems for the community?
4) Is there anything the college needs, that it currently doesn't have, to function?

Hand-out list of projects. The administrative team and Board of Trustees believe there are a number of projects for which additional state revenues will not be available. One option to address these needs would be to seek an increase in local property taxes. This might be for a specific period to pay off a bond or an on-going parcel tax. Another option is to ignore these...

5) Within the Facilities list, which would you consider necessary?
6) Within the Information Technology list, which would you consider necessary?
7) Within the Deferred Maintenance list, which would you consider necessary?
   (necessary = to serve the community? PDC, N/C (GED), more students)
8) How would you rank these overall?
9) If you were President of the college, how would you go about convincing the community that the college needs a $25 per year (parcel) tax increase?
10) Do you think your neighborhood could be convinced?

G.O. BOND PROJECTS

The following projects are suggested for a possible G.O. Bond measure:

FACILITIES:	$	
(Not presented in order of priority)		
1. **Allied Health /Aviation Arts Building**	10,700,000	
2. **Science Building Remodel/Addition**	9,543,000	
3. **P.E. Facilities**	13,700,000	
4. New Student Center/Campus Center Remodel	5,679,000	
5. Music Wing Addition/Remodel	1,540,000	
6. Architectural Barrier Removal	4,960,000	
7. Seismic Upgrade	4,500,000	
	50,622,000	
INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY:		
1. Administrative Computing	1,500,000	
2. Faculty Computing	1,500,000	
3. Instructional Technology	2,000,000	
	5,000,000	
DEFERRED MAINTENANCE:		
1. Painting	200,000	
2. Roof Replacement-South Gym	43,000	
3. Electric Switch gear replacement	150,000	
4. North Gym Air-conditioning	32,000	
5. Refurbish Football Field	67,000	
6. Clean Air-conditioning Ducts	50,000	
	542,000	
GRAND TOTAL		**$56,164,000**

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